

## HISTORY AND EPONYMY OF THE GENUS NAME *AMSONIA* (APOCYNACEAE)

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### ABSTRACT

The genus *Amsonia* was named for Dr John Amson, a physician in Williamsburg, Virginia, in the mid-nineteenth century

### RESUMEN

El genero *Amsonia* fue nombrado por Dr. John Amson, un médico de Williamsburg, Virginia, en la mitad del siglo diez y nueve.

*Amsonia* Walter is a genus of about twenty species native to North America and eastern Asia, of which the best known is *A. tabernaemontana* Walter, the eastern bluestar. The name *Amsonia* was first applied to that species by John Clayton of Gloucester, in colonial Virginia, in the 1750s, and ever since that time uncertainty has persisted and statements have differed as to its derivation or eponymy.

Clayton did not include the name *Amsonia* in the manuscript that he sent to the Dutch botanist Johan Frederik Gronovius, much of which Gronovius (1739) incorporated into his *Flora Virginica*. At that time Clayton thought that the bluestar might be considered a species of *Nerium* (oleander), and designated it "*Anonymus Suffrutex foliis Salicis alternis...Nerii species*." He gave it the name *Amsonia* in the later manuscript (not extant) on the plants of Virginia that he sent to Peter Collinson in England in 1757, but that work was never published. He also included the name *Amsonia* with specimens and seeds that he sent to British and European botanists. Still later Clayton proposed a different name for the eastern bluestar, based on the form of the seeds, but that name likewise remained unpublished. By then, the name *Amsonia* had become inseparably associated with this species, which had quickly become popular in British horticulture following its introduction as *Amsonia* by Philip Miller in 1759 (Smith 1819; Berkeley & Berkeley 1963, 1982).

Linnaeus received a description of the eastern bluestar from his former student Daniel C. Solander in 1761. Solander, who was living in London at the time, had based this description on plants he had seen in the gardens of Peter

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Collinson and James Gordon, supplemented with information from Clayton's manuscript. He informed Linnaeus that Clayton had called the species *Amsonia*, but added that "whence the name was taken I know not," nor did any of the botanists in London and vicinity of whom he had inquired; they believed "that Clayton named it for someone in North America" (letter from Solander to Linnaeus 16 November 1761, excerpted by Berkeley & Berkeley 1963). In 1762 Linnaeus received a sketch and information on the eastern bluestar from the botanical artist Georg Dionysius Ehret, with a promise of specimens to be sent via Solander (Calmann 1977). Ehret had been approached with regard to illustrating the work that Clayton had sent to Collinson, and had studied specimens collected by Clayton. Later that year Linnaeus (1762) named the species *Tabernaemontana Amsonia*.

The "*Anonymus Suffrutex*" was designated *Clayton 306* by Gronovius, but no such specimen is in the Clayton herbarium now at BM. The Linnaean herbarium at the Natural History Museum in Stockholm (S-LINN) contains a specimen of the eastern bluestar from the herbarium of Clas Alströmer, who had acquired it from Andreas Dahl. It is labeled "*Tabernaemontana Amsonia*" and "Dahl a Linné P" in Dahl's handwriting, indicating that Dahl had received it from Linnaeus himself (Lindman 1908). It was perhaps part of a collection made by Clayton and given to Linnaeus by Ehret or Gronovius, or it may have been obtained by Solander from a cultivated plant.

*Amsonia* was published as a genus name by Thomas Walter in 1788. The name of the type species, *Amsonia Tabernaemontana* Walter, was based on *Tabernaemontana Amsonia* L. Walter gave no derivation or eponymy for the name.

Many recent references state that *Amsonia* was named for "Charles Amson." The earliest association of the forename Charles with *Amsonia* that I have found was by Loudon (1830), according to whom the genus was named for "Charles Amason [sic], an American traveller." This eponymy for *Amsonia* was soon adopted in other British and Continental European references. The surname was altered to "Amson" by Paxton (1840), who identified Charles Amson as "a traveller in America." Nicholson (1884), whose wording has been retained in the successive editions of the *Royal Horticultural Society Dictionary of Gardening*, identified Charles Amson as a "scientific traveller in America."

It may be pertinent to the credibility of this eponymy that Loudon almost certainly would have seen Smith's (1819) account of the Neotropical genus *Amasonia* L.f. (Verbenaceae). As noted by Smith, Linnaeus filius had stated that *Amasonia* was named "in memory of Amason, a traveller in America" (translation), whom, according to Smith, "M. [Alexandre] De Thies [had] baptized Thomas." Smith was skeptical, because he had "never been able to learn any tidings of such a person." Linnaeus filius provided no forename or further information, and may merely have assumed that South America's largest river, the name of which is spelled "Amason" in Swedish and some other European languages, was

named for an explorer. Loudon, however, having seen statements that *Amasonia* was named for Thomas Amason, may have followed De Thies's alleged precedent a step further and arbitrarily coined the name Charles Amason, and designated that imaginary person, like Thomas Amason, "an American traveller."

Of *Amsonia*, Smith (1819) said that "no positive account of the meaning or origin" of the name could be given, noting only that it had originally been bestowed by Clayton. He speculated that the spelling of the names *Amasonia* and *Amsonia* might represent an error, and that both genera might have been named for the British Admiral George Anson, Baron Anson of Soberton. Rafinesque (1838, 1840) accepted this eponymy with none of Smith's uncertainty and "corrected" the spelling to "*Ansonia*," but no others have done so.

The eponymy given by Loudon and Paxton was probably the basis for Gray's (1856) statement, in the second edition of his *Manual*, that *Amsonia* was "said to be named for a Mr. Charles Amson." That uncertain wording was retained through the sixth edition of *Gray's Manual*. Wood (1861) expanded it to "Dedicated to Charles Amson, of S. Carolina?" The speculative addition was not explained, but may have been made because the genus name was published by Walter, whose botanical activity had been confined to South Carolina. Britton and Brown (1896) stated with no such reservation that the genus was named "for Charles Amson of South Carolina." That wording was soon adopted in other American publications.

Woodson (1928) was skeptical about references to "Charles Amson." He consulted encyclopedic and historical references and made inquiries of historical societies in Virginia and the Carolinas, and found no evidence that any Charles Amson had lived or traveled in Virginia or the Carolinas during the colonial period or contributed to the knowledge of their natural history. Likewise, using more recent biographical references and publications from that history-conscious region, as well as Internet search engines, I found no record of any Charles Amson in those colonies during the 18th century (except as the supposed eponym of *Amsonia*). Nor have I found any mention of either of Loudon's "travellers" in any other context. Consequently, I share Smith's, Gray's, and Woodson's skepticism about their having existed. Had they lived and explored the wilds of the Americas, it seems unlikely that they could so greatly have impressed Clayton and Linnaeus filius, and at least have been known to Loudon, yet so completely have escaped the attention of historians and biographers. A thorough search would be complicated by the apparently independent origins of the surname Amason in England and Scandinavia. Even if these Amasons existed, however, there is ample evidence, presented below, that the apocynaceous genus *Amsonia* was not named for either of them.

The earliest extant indication that *Amsonia* was named for a physician is in a letter written 30 December 1759 by Ehret (Berkeley & Berkeley 1963), who had probably seen words to that effect in Clayton's manuscript or correspon-

dence. Apparently not distinguishing between Carolina and Virginia as Clayton's place of residence, he wrote that *Amsonia* had been named "perhaps for a doctor in Carolina."

An indication of the eponymy of *Amsonia* by Clayton himself appears in a letter from him to the Philadelphia botanist John Bartram dated 1 September 1760, in which he said that he had previously proposed that the plant be named *Amsonia* "for a doctor, here" (William and Mary College Quart. Hist. Mag., ser. 3, 6: 319, 1926; Woodson 1928). Woodson inferred from Clayton's use of "here" that *Amsonia* had been named for "a physician of Gloucester County, Virginia." He added that "regarding his complete name, or the positive spelling of his family name, doubt still remains." The same letter was probably the basis for the statements by Robinson and Fernald (1908) and Fernald (1950), in the seventh and eighth editions of *Gray's Manual*, that *Amsonia* was "Named for Dr. Amson, physician of Gloucester, Virginia, in 1760, and friend of John Clayton." Combinations of "Charles Amson," from Loudon, Paxton, Gray, and Britton and Brown, and "physician" and "Virginia," from Robinson, Fernald, and Woodson, have come to prevail in recent publications.

Berkeley and Berkeley (1963, 1982) found from a source on Virginia medical history (Blanton 1931) that Dr. John Amson had been practicing in Williamsburg, Virginia, in 1751. They (1982) concluded that "Clayton had named the new genus *Amsonia* in honor of his friend Dr. John Amson of Williamsburg." I have not found this information repeated by any more recent botanical authors.

The Berkeleys found one other published reference to this Dr. Amson, which noted only that he frequently used the expression "neither here nor there." Present-day search engines, although not providing all standard biographical data, do lead to further information about the Dr. Amson who was Clayton's contemporary in colonial Virginia.

Records in the Archives of Colonial Williamsburg, compiled and annotated by Mary A. Stephenson (1961), confirm the Berkeleys' finding that John Amson, a "Doctor of Physic," lived and practiced in Williamsburg in the mid-18th century. Clayton would have considered Williamsburg, ca. 22 km away across the York River in James City and York counties, near enough to Gloucester to justify the use of "here" in writing to Bartram in Philadelphia, especially since he had spent part of his youth in Williamsburg and members of his family lived there.

I have found no definite information on this Dr. Amson's genealogy or his life prior to his practicing medicine in Williamsburg. Records compiled by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints provide limited data on a few individuals named John Amson who lived in England and Scotland during the first 40 years of the 18th century, but no data on anyone by that name in colonial Virginia. The record perhaps most likely to be relevant is that of John Amson, son of James and Margaret Amson, who was baptized 24 July 1699, at the age of one year, in St. Sepulchre Church, London (where Captain John Smith of early

Virginia history had been interred). The time and (in view of data presented below) the country fit, but nevertheless it is by no means certain that this was the same John Amson.

Although an English origin is not unlikely, the name Amson does not appear in Munk's Roll of the members of the Royal College of Physicians. However, since the surname is not common, it does seem probable that Dr. John Amson of colonial Virginia was the John Amson, M.D., who received that degree from the university at Rheims (now Reims), France, 2 September 1722. Such credentials would have been impressive in colonial America, consistent with the apparent reputation (below) of Dr. Amson of Williamsburg as one of the "best Physicians" in Virginia. This record is from a list of early students from the British Isles at medical schools in continental Europe, compiled by Dr. Harold T. Swan (1996). This compilation was based on manuscript notes that had been in the possession of the medical historian Dr. Robert W. Innes Smith at the time of his death in 1933 (originals at the University of Sheffield). Aside from the data noted above, it states only that this John Amson was English, as distinguished from Scottish or Irish. According to Dr. Swan (pers. comm. 11 April 2003), Innes Smith's notes contain nothing further on Amson. He considers it unlikely that Innes Smith found additional information at Reims, because many of the university's records from the relevant time had been destroyed, presumably during the French Revolution.

I have not found when Amson arrived in America, if in fact he was of English birth. The earliest record of his presence in Virginia that I have encountered is from 1738, when the estate of the late Dr. Charles Brown of Williamsburg retrieved a book that Amson had borrowed from Brown's library (James 1895).

A physician in Williamsburg in 1738 could hardly have avoided the controversy associated with John Tennent, a "practitioner of medicine" in that city (Blanton 1931; Jellison 1963). Tennent's domestic medical manual, *Every Man His Own Doctor*, was highly popular, but some physicians questioned his competence and objected to his pursuit of financial recognition from public funds. In particular, his advocacy of the use of *Polygala senega* L. became obsessive, and his reactions toward those who took issue with him became intemperate. He felt that physicians who held medical degrees from European universities were unjustifiably disdainful of those who had obtained their qualifications through apprenticeship and independent study. I have found no record of Amson's involvement in this controversy. In one of his statements in his own defense, however, Tennent (1738) implied that medical degrees were awarded too freely at Rheims, alleging that one had inadvertently been bestowed upon a horse. Rheims may by chance have provided an anecdote that Tennent considered suitable for his purposes, but one wonders if someone with a degree from Rheims was among those whom Tennent perceived as a hostile medical establishment.

In 1746, Amson bought the property identified as Lots 212-217, Block 36,

City of Williamsburg, County of York, from Thomas Jones, nephew-in-law of the naturalist Mark Catesby. These lots at the intersection of Boundary and Scotland streets had been so numbered by the Trustees for the Land when the city was laid out. Much later they included the site of "Wheatlands," the home of the artist Georgia O'Keefe during her late teens. The property included at least one house plus outbuildings when it was acquired by Amson. He owned and resided on this property until his death. About 1751 he purchased from Henry Tyler 180 acres of land just outside the Williamsburg city limits (Stephenson 1961). As well as being a physician Amson appears to have been a planter, or gentleman farmer, as men primarily associated with other enterprises or professions often were in colonial times. At least as early as 1746 he was an alderman (Stephenson 1954), and in 1750-1751 he was mayor of Williamsburg (Bodie et al. ca. 1999).

In 1758 then-Colonel George Washington had been ill for some time, probably with dysentery, although he was concerned that he might have consumption. He traveled from Mount Vernon to Williamsburg "to receive the Advice of the best Physicians," and there consulted Dr. Amson on 15 March (Fitzpatrick 1931-1944, including a letter from Washington to Colonel John Stanwyx, 5 March 1758). Fitzpatrick, in editing Washington's papers, commented that Washington "seems to have received the proper treatment, for he was able to be back to his command at Fort Loudon April 5." Amson may also have treated Daniel Parke Custis, whose widow Washington subsequently married; he was listed among the creditors of Custis's estate, although Dr. James Carter was recorded as having been the attending physician during Custis's last illness (Stephenson 1959, Abbot 1988).

A few other references to Dr. John Amson of Williamsburg appear in historical sources. He was among the "officials of the government of Virginia" who signed an oath of allegiance to King George II (Virginia...1738-1752), probably having done so upon becoming alderman or mayor. York County records indicate that as of 21 September 1747 he was paying taxes on five "tithables," i.e., indentured slaves (Stephenson 1961). His name appears in the account book of the Yorktown merchant William Lightfoot (Lightfoot 1740-1764), and he was one of those who proved the will of Philip Lightfoot in 1748 (Tyler 1894). The jurist John Blair recorded having visited Amson's gardens 24 March 1751 (Tyler 1899), but wrote nothing about the gardens.

Neither Ms. Stephenson nor I have been able to determine the date of Amson's death, although the well-indexed *Virginia Gazette* usually published obituaries of prominent Williamsburg residents. His will was proved in the General Court of Virginia, of which the records from the relevant period are not extant (Stephenson 1961). His death evidently occurred after November 1761, when he was listed as a creditor of the estate of John Parke Custis, son of Daniel (Stephenson 1959; Abbot 1988), and before July 1765. Records of land owner-

ship include that of a transaction in July 1765 in which Anne Anderson is said to have inherited the six lots and the buildings thereon in Williamsburg plus the 180 acres outside the city from "the late Dr. Amson." Mrs. Anderson, who was at that time the wife of Robert Anderson of Williamsburg, is thought likely to have been Amson's daughter, or possibly his widow if she had soon remarried, but the relationship has not been determined (Stephenson 1961). I have found no mention of any other individuals with the surname Amson in eighteenth-century Williamsburg and vicinity.

What may be Amson's only extant writing therefore appears to have been published posthumously, either from a handwritten heirloom or as a reprint from an earlier publication. This (Amson 1776) is a prescription for the treatment of whooping cough, which included several botanical ingredients, in quantities deemed appropriate for a boy of ten. The treatment began with an emetic containing ipecachuana and oxymel of squills (*Urginea maritima* (L.) Baker, a mild source of cardiac glycosides). This was followed first by chamomile tea, then by elixir paregoricum (an opiate) in pennyroyal tea and mint water. The next day the treatment called for gum ammoniac (resin from *Dorema ammoniacum* D. Don) in pennyroyal tea, mixed with the juice pressed from two hundred woodlice in white wine, with saffron and honey.

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